

The Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* in Africa

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Le Courlis à bec grêle *Numenius tenuirostris* en Afrique. La dernière observation du Courlis à bec grêle *Numenius tenuirostris*, une espèce considérée comme « Gravement menacé d'extinction », date d'avril 2001 en Hongrie. L'article passe en revue les mentions du courlis en Afrique du Nord et ailleurs en Afrique (Seychelles, Djibouti, Soudan, Chad, Gambie), en se basant sur les données rassemblées par le Groupe de travail du Courlis à bec grêle (<http://www.slenderbilledcurlew.net>), afin d'identifier les zones potentielles où chercher l'espèce et la meilleure période pour le faire.

The Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* (Fig. 1) is a Critically Endangered species and the only 'lost' species in the Western Palearctic, with no verified records for almost a decade (the Hungarian Rarities Committee has accepted a record from April 2001 in Kiskunság National Park: Oláh & Pigniczki in press). The population has declined dramatically over the past century, with loss of habitat and hunting pressure considered the key likely causes (BirdLife International 2009a). The only verified breeding site, recorded during the first quarter of the 20th century, is north of Omsk, in southern Siberia (Gretton *et al.* 2002). There are passage, and other non-breeding season records of the species from across Europe (Delany *et al.* 2009). Whilst there are also a few non-breeding records from the

Middle East, North Africa is the main known non-breeding area for Slender-billed Curlew. Indeed, the species was first described from a specimen shot in Egypt in 1817.

The best known site for the Slender-billed Curlew is Merja Zerga, in Morocco, where birds were regularly recorded between the 1950s and February 1995 (Fig. 2), since when there have been no confirmed sightings in North Africa. However, the species might still be present in the region, given that two much more conspicuous globally threatened bird populations have recently been discovered within the range of the Slender-billed Curlew, namely those of Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* (BirdLife International 2009b) and, in Syria, the only natural breeding colony of Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* outside



Figure 1. Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* (left) with Eurasian Curlew *N. arquata orientalis* in Yemen, October 1984 (Richard Porter)

Courlis à bec grêle *Numenius tenuirostris* (à gauche) avec Courlis cendré *N. arquata orientalis* au Yemen, octobre 1984 (Richard Porter)



Figure 2. Slender-billed Curlews *Numenius tenuirostris* in Morocco, January 1994 (Brayton Holt)

Courlis à bec grèle *Numenius tenuirostris* au Maroc, janvier 1994 (Brayton Holt)

Morocco (BirdLife International 2009c). Here we review records of Slender-billed Curlew in North Africa, together with a few records from outlying countries (Seychelles, Djibouti, Sudan, Chad, Gambia), based on records collated by the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group (<http://www.slenderbilledcurlew.net>). We do so in order to identify potential areas for searches, and the optimum time to visit these locations.

Geographic distribution of Slender-billed Curlew records

The distribution of records from North Africa by year (each location in each year counted only once, even if birds were recorded multiple times) indicates that the number of records of Slender-billed Curlew slowly increased during the 20th century (Fig. 3), especially after 1970. This increase was probably the result of a greater awareness of the species, plus the greater number of experienced European birdwatchers travelling to North Africa. However, the number of records then crashes post-1995.

Despite the popularity of one site (Merja Zerga in Morocco) at this time, it is notable that a large number of records came from elsewhere during the period between 1970 and 2000. This suggests that, while it held the largest known population (up to 12 birds in some years), it was not the only area where birds were recorded in North Africa at this time. The majority of records (each location in each year counted only once, even if birds were recorded multiple times) of Slender-billed Curlew in North Africa come from Morocco (Figs. 4–5). The majority of sightings are from Merja Zerga, but even this well-watched site only accounted for

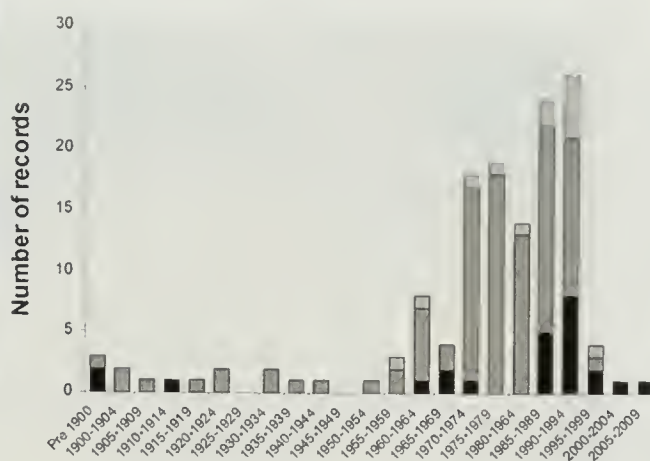


Figure 3. Distribution of Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* records in North Africa by year since 1850. Record defined as a sighting in a location in a year. Black = unverified records; grey = verified records; pale grey = records from Merja Zerga, Morocco.

Répartition des données du Courlis à bec grèle *Numenius tenuirostris* en Afrique du Nord par année depuis 1850. Donnée définie comme une observation en une localité en une année. Noir = données non vérifiées ; gris = données vérifiées ; gris hachuré = données de Merja Zerga, Maroc.

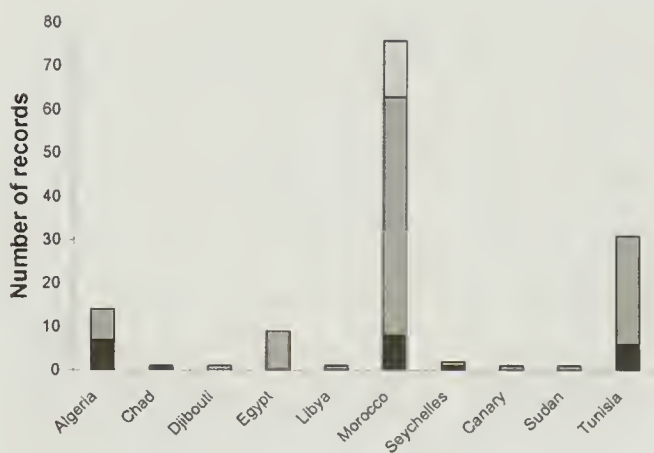


Figure 4. Distribution of Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* records in African countries since 1850. Record defined as sighting in a location in a year. Black = unverified records; grey = verified records; pale grey = records from Merja Zerga, Morocco.

Répartition des données du Courlis à bec grèle *Numenius tenuirostris* en Afrique par année depuis 1850. Donnée définie comme une observation en une localité en une année. Noir = données non vérifiées ; gris = données vérifiées ; gris hachuré = données de Merja Zerga, Maroc.

some 21% of the Moroccan records. Tunisia had the next largest number of records after Morocco, with the majority of these coming from the area around Kairouan, Metbassta.

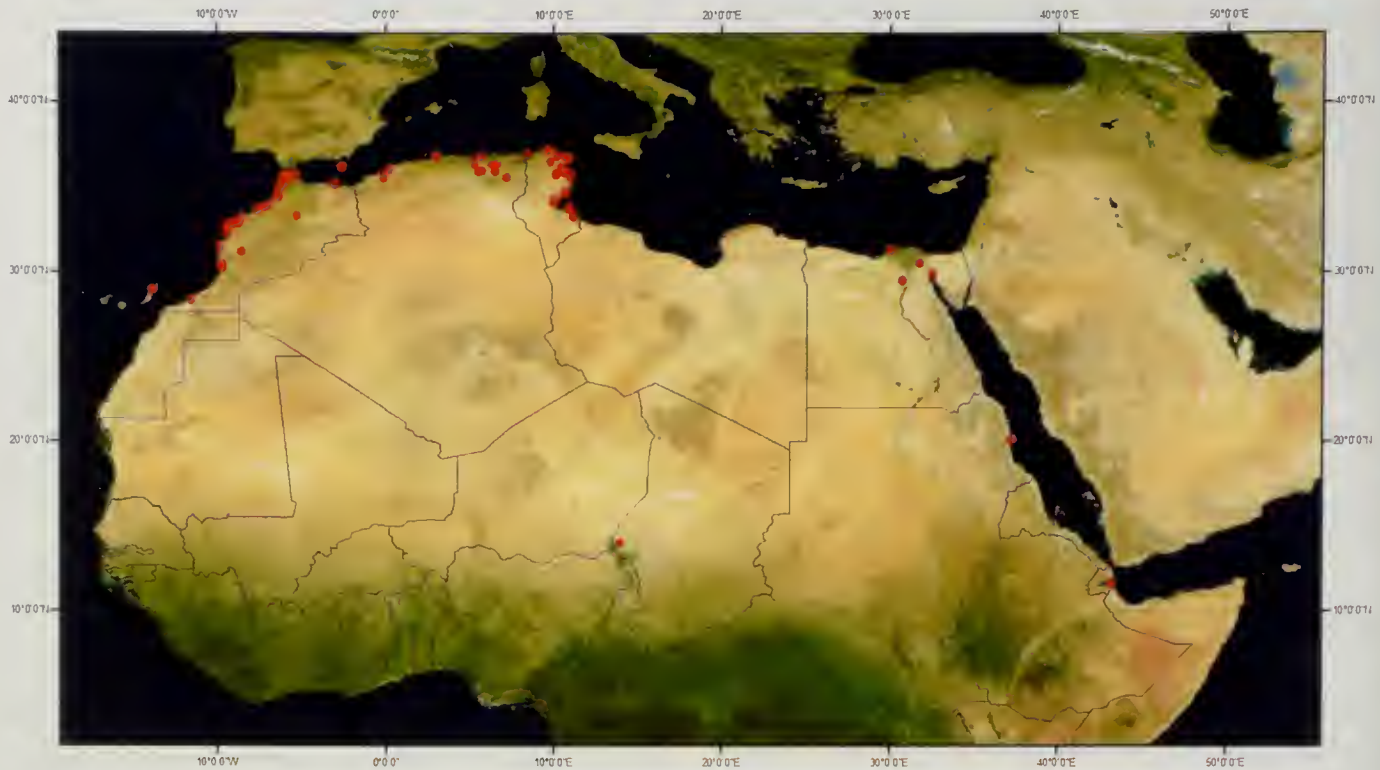


Figure 5. Distribution of accepted Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* records in North Africa between 1900 and 2000.

Répartition des données acceptées du Courlis à bec grêle *Numenius tenuirostris* en Afrique du Nord entre 1900 et 2000.

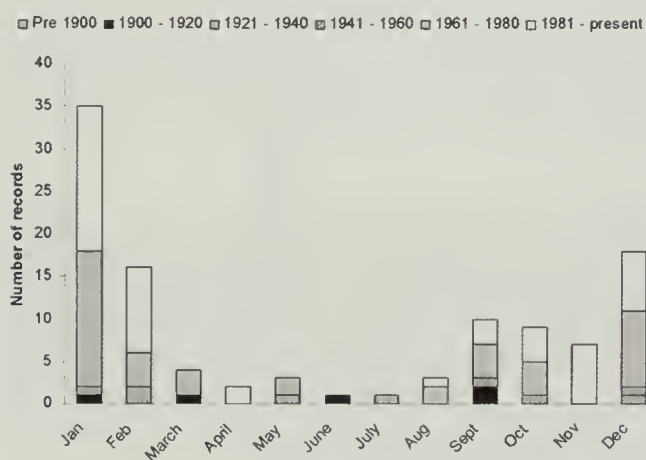


Figure 6. Distribution of confirmed Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris* records in North Africa by month since 1850, subdivided by 20-year time periods.

Répartition des données acceptées du Courlis à bec grêle *Numenius tenuirostris* en Afrique du Nord par mois depuis 1850, subdivisées par périodes de 20 ans.

The distribution of records will reflect the distribution of observers, with the best-known sites being better watched. The paucity of records from Libya and Algeria might therefore be misleading, and these countries could potentially have held non-breeding populations too. In addition to possible records from the Red Sea coasts of Sudan

and Djibouti, outlying reports come from inland Chad, with a couple of records from Seychelles. There are further records from Lanzarote, in the Canaries, and two undocumented reports from The Gambia.

Behaviour in North Africa

The majority of records of Slender-billed Curlew in North Africa appear to be close to the sea (Fig. 5). Indeed, 91.5% of the 142 sites with Slender-billed Curlew records are within 1 km of the coast. Unfortunately, it is difficult to assess the habitats at these sites since land cover might have changed during the intervening period, but analysis based on land cover type within 1 km of sightings, using GlobCover 2005 (ESA 2009), indicates that the major habitat was open water, covering some 29.5% of the area. Mosaics of grasslands and arable covered 26%, whilst sparse vegetation or bare areas covered 8% each.

The predominance of open water could partly reflect the tendency of birdwatchers to focus on such areas, whereas observations of the Merja Zerga birds suggest that they would often feed on dry sandy farmland 1–2 km from the wetland, as well as sometimes using grazed marshy areas closer to the lagoon. There was a striking difference in

habitat use between years: in the non-breeding season of 1987–88, most foraging was in the brackish grazed marsh close to the lagoon, but in subsequent years the birds usually fed on the higher sandy land further from the lagoon. This area was a mixture of cultivated arable strips and fallow areas, and was used by feeding Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*, with which the Slender-billed Curlews associated (together with Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa*). The mudflats of the lagoon itself were used by roosting Slender-billed Curlews, usually together with Eurasian Curlew. At Merja Zerga the Slender-billed Curlews generally had a regular pattern, feeding for 2–4 hours after dawn, then roosting in the lagoon, before feeding again from mid-afternoon until near dusk, when they again roosted in the lagoon (Gretton 1991). In this situation, it would be extremely unlikely that a survey between approximately 10.00 hrs and 15.00 hrs would have detected the birds, and we recommend this be taken into account at sites where a similar pattern could apply.

Temporal distribution of records

The majority of records in North Africa over the years have consistently come from January (Fig. 6), with just under 50% of records in December and February. There are few records between March and September, which is when birds are either on passage through Europe or at the breeding sites. Birds appear to start returning to some sites at least as early as September, with similar numbers in October. Oddly, all records from November come from post-1981, even though records in surrounding months come from all time periods.

Slender-billed Curlew conservation

Finding the areas used by Slender-billed Curlews through the year is a priority for their conservation. Conservation efforts are being led by the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group, founded under the framework of an international Memorandum of Understanding for the species under the United Nations Convention on Migratory Species. To help find areas where the bird still occurs, a top priority of the Group is to encourage a search of the potential non-breeding range of the species, which extends across North Africa to the Middle East, and beyond (if subsequent research narrows the search for the breeding grounds, then the search could be extended there too).

If appropriate, any birds that are found will be caught and satellite-tagged. The satellite tags will help locate the key sites for the bird throughout its annual cycle and thus enable urgent conservation action to be taken. The main focus of the search is on the known non-breeding and potential moult sites because it is more likely that birds will be present long enough to enable catching and tagging. The priority is to search sites where the species has previously been recorded, but also to check those with similar characteristics to historical sites. A protocol on search methodology has been produced to provide guidance to those joining the search (www.slenderbilledcurlew.net). We encourage observers, whether local or through expeditions, to check potential areas. Areas of potentially suitable habitat could be identified using Google Earth prior to undertaking field work. Furthermore, to help narrow the search, observers are requested to submit any past records, including any 'possible' sightings.

Conclusion

Based on a broad-scale examination of the database of historical records, and a detailed review of key historical sites for Slender-billed Curlew, we have identified those site characteristics that could be useful in targeting field surveys in the search for the species' non-breeding areas in North Africa. Because Slender-billed Curlew poses identification challenges and because its habitat might include inland feeding areas that do not tend to be frequented by birders, and inaccessible inter-tidal roost areas out of range of most observers, there is a real chance that it has been overlooked. We suggest that surveys should be targeted on areas of the North African coast, from Morocco to Egypt, within a couple of kilometres of the coastline. Large-scale habitat analysis does not particularly limit areas to be searched, but historical records suggest attention should focus on lagoons and estuaries, and areas of adjacent feeding habitat (not just wetlands, bearing in mind the preference for dry sandy feeding areas at Merja Zerga). It is of paramount importance that any records of birds that could still be present in the field are immediately reported to the Working Group to facilitate rapid reaction to help verify the record and undertake conservation action, including fitting a satellite tag.

Please send records/digital images/sound recordings etc immediately to the Slender-billed Curlew Working Group Coordinator: timcleeves@yahoo.co.uk, mobile +44 7920050670, 11 Plessey Crescent, Whitley Bay, Tyne & Wear NE25 8QJ, UK, and the Slender-billed Working Group Chair Nicola.crockford@rspb.org.uk, tel. +44 1767 680551.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all of the observers who have submitted details to the SBCWG database, and all those who have helped manage it, including R. Ahmed, J. Hatt and I. Fisher. We thank Tim Dodman for comments on an earlier version of this text, and Richard Porter and Brayton Holt for their images.

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Received 4 November 2009.

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